

## A Soldier's Secret

By Captain CHARLES KING, U. S. A.

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### CHAPTER I.

When the Indian summer haze is hovering over the bluffs along the Pawnee in these dreamy, sunshiny afternoons of late November, there is a languorous spell even in soldier life, and the troopers love to loiter about the wide porches of the barracks during their brief leisure moments or while waiting the trumpet call for stables. There is scarcely a breath of air astir. The broad, fertile valley under the bluffs, forest fringed along the stream, gives forth a faint, pungent, smoky odor, and the eye wanders across its soft undulations, its vistas of alternate glade, grove and shadowy pool, and sees it all as through some filmy, intangible veil. The sharp outlines so characteristic of the frontier at other seasons, giving to the ridge to the northwest that razorback guise that inspired the original explorers, Kentuckians and Missourians, to refer to the range as "Hawg Buttes," are mellowed into softer curves.

There is an echo sprite abroad in the autumn skies, for the distant whistle of the trains, the puff and pant of engines miles away, the rumble of the express as it flies across the wooden truss at Big Bend far down the valley, the lowing of cattle and the tinkle of their bells at the farms beyond the reservation lines, the shouts and laughter of village children scurrying the stream banks for the last of the year's crop of beech or butternut, the soft laughter of the ladies gathered in the veranda of the major's quarters, all come floating through the pulseless air to the listening ears of the sentry dawdling here along the post at the western gate and distracting his attention from the purely military functions which he is called upon to perform. Over at the guardhouse many of the men are drowsing in the afternoon sunshine. Among the stables the horses are standing at the picket line, with drooped heads and lazily swishing tails. The officer of the guard, knowing the colonel to be away on a late shooting excursion and the major held at home by the demands of hospitality, has dropped into a doze while sitting bolt upright at his wooden desk.



"My God! it's Nita Guthrie."

Scores of the garrison proper seem inclined to follow his example, and the tall, dark faced, black bearded soldier—a handsome fellow—leaning on the breast-high wall over at the east end midway between the hospital at the edge of the bluff and the junior surgeon's quarters, his chin on his arms, his cap pulled well down over his eyes, seems to have been stricken by the general somnolence. It is only the ladies who are wide awake and alert, for this is Nita Guthrie's last appearance, so to speak. She has been paying a brief visit to Dr. and Mrs. Holden, kinsfolk of hers, but is to take the east bound train this very night. Mrs. Holden goes, too, leaving her lord, the junior medical officer of the station, to the mercy of the other women, and of all the families of some thirty married officers stationed in this big garrison not one is unrepresented at Major Berrien's today, for Nita Guthrie has won all hearts. But this, say those who have known her long, is an old, old story with Nita; she has been doing the same thing for years.

There is tang of suggestiveness about this statement; moreover, it is true: Miss Guthrie is not in the first bloom of youth. "Why, she must be nearly thirty," say some of the younger girls and younger matrons, who envy her none the less the freshness, the grace, the winsomeness that hover about her mobile face; but those who are in position to know and have no reason to feel the faintest jealousy assert very positively that Nita is not more than twenty-five.

"Well, why hasn't she married?" is the instant query of Mrs. Vance, to whose benighted mind it ever appears that because a woman hasn't she cannot.

"Simply because the right man is yet to come," is Mrs. Harper's equally prompt reply. "Nita Guthrie has had more of-

fers in six years than any woman I ever heard of."

"Then there must be something back of it all," responds Mrs. Vance, whose theories are not to be lightly shaken. "Was there some early affair?"

"My dear Mrs. Vance, I have no doubt I could tell you a dozen stories, all plausible, all in active circulation when last I visited St. Louis and saw her in society there, and all as near the truth, probably, as any we could invent here. Nobody knows but Nita, and she won't tell."

Now as the autumn sun, all red burnished gold, is sinking to the horizon on this final day of a charming and memorable visit, Nita Guthrie is bidding adieu with laughing, kindly cordiality to the little coterie gathered in her honor. To one and all she has the same frank, gracious manner. Over all she throws the same odd magnetic spell, seeming to impress each and every one in turn with the same idea. "Now, you are just the most thoroughly delightful creature I have ever met, and I cannot bear to say goodbye to you." There is the lingering hand clasp, and yet not the faintest sentimentality. Nita's blue eyes—very blue—gaze straight into those of her friends. She seems to advance a step or two, as though eager to meet and take by the hand each newcomer. Even the elders among the women find it hard to go, and as for the girls, they linger spell-bound: they cluster about her, watching the sunshine in her face, the play of her features, the sparkle of her eyes, drinking in her winsome words, her rippling laughter.

"It's just the only chance we've had to ourselves, Miss Nita," protests Winifred Berrien. "You've been surrounded by men all the rest of the time, and we couldn't see you now if it weren't that they had to be in stables. Oh, if you only didn't have to go tonight!"

"Indeed, Winnie, I don't want to go. It seems to me nothing can be more delightful than life in an army post like this. Certainly no girl ever had a better time anywhere than you have given me here, and it is so unlike what I fancied it might be."

"It is entirely unlike what life on the frontier used to be, Miss Guthrie," answers her hostess, the major's wife, in her calm, placid way. "Any one contrasting our beatitude of today with our life here, there and everywhere over the west during the Indian campaigns in which the regiment was incessantly engaged can only wonder how we found it possible to exist in those days. Social conditions have changed, too, and in the gathering of our troops in larger garrisons a great many of the unpleasant features of the old life have been eliminated entirely. Indeed, I wish you might stay and see more of us. But you are coming again, are you not?"

"If wishing will bring it about I shall be with you again with the coming summer or early in the spring. I have promised Mrs. Holden that I will return to her if only for a fortnight."

The enthusiasm excited among the girls and apparently shared by all the women present when this announcement is made ought certainly to convince Miss Guthrie that they most reluctantly part with her now and most pleasantly anticipate her future coming. The clamor of voices is such that for a time no one is conscious of the fact that out on the parade the regimental line has formed and that the band is already trooping down the front. Berrien had taken his position as commanding officer. Several subalterns, whose heads were kept rigidly straight to the front, found their eyes wandering furtively over toward the major's quarters. In couples and groups a number of the ladies come sauntering forth, gathering opposite the center nearer the colonel's house, from which point they generally watched the closing ceremony of the day. But still oblivious to any music but that of her voice a dozen of their number hover about Miss Guthrie. Even gunfire fails to distract their attention. It is not until the major himself returns, tossing off his helmet and tugging at his waistbelt, that they realize that parade is over and dinner waiting.

"Now, you will come back next spring?" "You will write?" "You won't forget to send me the photograph—mind, cabinet size—Miss Nita?" "Indeed if ever I get anywhere near St. Louis you'll be the first soul I shall come in search of."

It is a little flock of enthusiastic army girls surrounding her, maidens whose early lives had been spent wandering from river to mountain, from the gulf to the Columbia, to whom city life was almost a revelation, and city belles beings from another world. Winifred Berrien is the leader of the coterie, a girl whose eyes are as dark as Nita's are blue, and they are ready to brim over at this very instant.

"Here comes Captain Rolfe for you now, and we've got to let you go; but we'll all be down to see you off at train time."

The man who enters at the moment and stands just within the heavy Navajo portiere, smilingly looking upon the group and quite unconscious of the almost vengeful glances in the eyes of the young girls, is a cavalry officer about thirty-five years of age. He is a tall fellow, somewhat heavily built, yet well proportioned and athletic. His face is tanned by long exposure to the sun and wind of the wide frontier. His brown hair, close cropped, has a suspicion of

gray just silvering the temples. His eyebrows are thick and strongly marked. The eyes beneath are deep set and fringed with heavy lashes. The mustache, sweeping from his upper lip, is of a lighter brown than his hair, but equally thick, heavy and curling. Otherwise his face is smoothly shaved, and is one which impresses those who look upon it, even carelessly, as strong and resolute. He still wears the double breasted coat, with shoulder knots and fourragere, just as he had come off parade, though he has exchanged helmet for forage cap, which latter headgear at this moment is being dangled in one hand, while the fingers of the other beat rapid tattoo upon the visor. The comrades of Rolfe would tell you this is a sign that he is nervous; yet to look at him there, smiling upon the group, quite as though remarking what a pretty picture they make, no one else would be apt to think of such a thing.

"Ready in a moment, Rolfe," shouts the major from an inner room. "You ready, Berengaria?"

"I am always ready, Richard, as you well know," is Mrs. Berrien's placid response. "I think I never kept you waiting so much as a moment."

"Promptest woman in the army or out of it," booms the major from his sanctum, his jovial voice resounding through the rooms of the bright garrison home. "Never knew anything like it, Miss Guthrie. Why, do you know, even when I wasn't half proposing she never let me finish the sentence! 'Twasn't at all what I was going to ask her—that day, at least. Meant to eventually, of course, if I ever could master up courage, but this time I had only found grit enough to ask for her picture, and I was engaged in less than ten seconds."

Winnie Berrien rushes from the parlor into the paternal den, voluble with protestations against such scandalous stories at mamma's expense; but Mrs. Berrien, slowly fanning herself, remains calmly seated, as though impervious to these damaging shots, at which everybody else is laughing merrily.

"Possibly you don't believe me," again booms the major, his jolly red face aglow, as he is dragged forth from the den, still struggling with the sleeve links of his cuff. "Winifred, my child, unhand me. You'll never bring your old father's gray hairs in sorrow to the grave by such unwomanly precipitancy, unless it's a civilian with ten thousand a year: will you, dearest? Miss Guthrie, I never expect to be a rich man. I hadn't as many dollars when I fell in love with Miss De Lancy as I had buttons, and we only wore single breasted coats in those days, and I was the junior captain. I pledge you my word I never would have had the cheek to offer myself. 'Twas the woman did it. I was going away for a week, and I said, 'You can give me one thing, if you will.' I only meant to beg for that picture, and, by Jove! she slipped her hand into mine. I was shaking all over. 'I—b—beg pardon, I stammered. 'I was only going to—beg for your p—p—p—' 'My promise!' said Berengaria, sweetly, looking up into my eyes. 'You have it, Richard.' Promptly? Why, she just jumped at me. Splendid arrangement, though, Miss Guthrie. She furnished the quarters and all the money, and I the vivacity and beauty of the household, until Winnie came: she contributes a little toward it now. But we're a model couple, aren't we, Berengaria?" And the major bends with playful tenderness, the fun sparkling in his eyes meanwhile, and kisses his handsome helpmeet's rosy cheek.

"We have few crosses, certainly," replies Mrs. Berrien, whose own name is anything but Berengaria, that being, as she is frequently called upon to explain, some of the major's historical nonsense. "We have few crosses, and those of course I bear. But now," she continues, with much decision of manner, "if you are partially restored to sanity we will go, or keep dinner longer waiting. Miss Guthrie, do they allow lunatics at large in the streets of St. Louis? Major Berrien spoke of getting a month's leave this winter and going thither."

"Oh, send him by all means, and he shall be treated at our own asylum. Father would rejoice in him—as I do, Mrs. Berrien."

"And shall I get the colonel to detail Rolfe here to conduct me thither and turn me over to the asylum authorities?" queries the major, with a knowing cock of the head. "Rolfe hates city life as a general thing, but he would accept that duty, I fancy."

"Captain Rolfe will be very welcome. Indeed, I only wish you might bring the whole regiment, major. Just think what a good time the girls would have this winter if that were only possible."

"Berengaria says," bursts in the major again, "that if I only show you proper attention on this visit you'll be sure to send us invitations to bring the whole family and spend six weeks at least."

"Father, you outrageous fibber!" gasps Winifred, rushing at him and placing one slim hand upon his mouth, while twining the other, with its soft, white arm, about his neck. "Indeed, Miss Guthrie, you must be told that father is perpetually poking fun at mother, making her say all manner of things she never thought of. It is all well enough in the regiment, where people understand it and are prepared for his nonsense, but many strangers are completely deceived at times, and

mamma never so much as remonstrates."

Evidently mamma does not consider it worth while.

"It would be wasting time, Miss Guthrie, and we are wasting time as it is. Captain Hazlett will never forgive you, Major Berrien, if you keep dinner waiting another minute. Captain Rolfe, will you escort Miss Guthrie? Come, Richard, march!"

"After you, Rolfe," says the major, with a bow of extra ceremony. "After you."

"Before them, if you please, you blind goose!" whispers his better half. "Haven't you sense enough to see he wants to speak with her and that this may be the only opportunity?"

"What! Rolfe wants to talk with her? Why, Miss Guthrie," he booms aloud, "I hadn't the faintest idea"—But here the wife of his bosom lays firm hand upon his sunburned ear and fairly marches him forth upon the veranda. Miss Guthrie would indeed have been glad to lead, but Rolfe's hand, trembling slightly, as she cannot but note, is laid upon her wrist, restraining her.

"Why didn't you tell me you wanted to talk with Rolfe, Miss Guthrie?" queries the major over his shoulder, with every appearance of concern. "I could have fixed it all for you."

"Silence, Dick," sternly murmurs Mrs. Berrien. "There is no fun in this affair, and I warn you—not another word."

Twilight has fallen upon the garrison as they stroll across the parade. The men have vanished from the scene, but the tinkle of guitar and banjo tells where they have gathered. Most of the officers are at dinner. One or two couples are just entering the gateway of Hazlett's quarters—guests invited to meet the fair visitor on this the last evening of her stay. Dr. and Mrs. Holden can be seen among them, Mrs. Holden gazing somewhat anxiously at Nita and her escort, for it is plain that Rolfe seeks to detain the woman to whom he has paid such unusual and devoted attention ever since the hour of her arrival. Silence and peace have spread their wings abroad, hovering with the twilight over the broad reservation, and the Berriens, walking rapidly now, as the energetic lady can lead her exulting spouse, come suddenly upon the sight of the great golden moon rising above the distant bluffs and peering in upon the garrison through the wide space that interposes between the surgeon's quarters and the barracks at the east end.

"Now there is something Miss Guthrie really must see," says Berrien, halting short. "As one of her admirers and entertainers, I feel bound to call her attention to it."

"Dick!—stupid!—move on at once. You must not speak to her now. Can't you see?"

"See? Of course I see, and I want her to see—that's why I stop." Again halting, he attempts to turn as though bent on looking back. She promptly whirls him about and faces him in the proper direction. "Oh," he persists, "if it is something about her you wanted to me to see, can't you understand that I have no eyes in the back of my head and that therefore I should be allowed to look about?"

"You see, sir, and understand the situation perfectly well as it is. You're simply bent on mischief. You know that Rolfe has been her shadow all day long, hanging about her to say his say. He knows this to be his last chance. Everybody will be there the moment dinner is over. Everybody will surround her, and unless he speaks now he must let her go without a word."

"Berengaria, you amaze me! Are you conniving at his capture? Didn't you tell me you knew she wouldn't have him?"

"I did! I know it now; but he is a man who wants to hear his fate from her own lips and plead his cause, too, like a man, unless I am very much mistaken in him. No, sir, don't you dare look back."

"Poor devil! Why couldn't he wait till after dinner? He might be in softer mood then. I always am. That's why you always wait till after dinner, I presume, when you have anything special to ask. Now this will take his appetite away entirely."

"As if he had any in the first place! Positively, Richard, you have no soul above a dinner. When a man is as desperately in love as Rolfe; do you suppose he cares much what he eats?"

"Well, seems to me I was never off my feed," is Berrien's reply with preternatural gravity, looking straight to the front now and refusing to meet his wife's dark eyes.

"You! with fine scorn. 'You! Why, Richard Berrien, with all your amiable qualities of heart and weaknesses of head no one on earth would ever associate you and sentiment in the same breath. Of course you and your appetite are inseparable; but Rolfe is different: he is a lover.'"

"Well, what am I?"

"You are simply a goose tonight. Come, don't stop at the gate now; push right on into the house after the Holdens. I'll run up to Mrs. Hazlett's room with Nita."

A dozen of the fort people only have been bidden to dinner, for hardly a dining room at the post is big enough for more, and on the porch anxiously awaiting the coming of his guests is Hazlett.

"Where are Rolfe and Miss Guthrie?" asks he as men will ask. "All here now but them."

"Coming at once; only a few steps behind us," promptly answers Mrs. Berrien. "Run in, major; I'll wait for Nita." Berrien looks as though he meditated a mischievous remark, but something in her voice and manner tells him that instant obedience is expected. He gives one quick glance and steps into the hall.

Presently, while chatting with others of the arriving party, he is conscious of the swish of skirts passing up the stairway. The door to the veranda is still open, and glancing out Berrien can see Rolfe alone leaning against one of the wooden pillars, his head drooping as though plunged in deep thought.

"Poor old chap! he's got his conge tonight, and that's the end of his two years' romance. Odd about that girl. She fancies nobody."

Three hours later, the moon being well up in the heavens now, and the whole parade shining revealed almost as bright as day, both the verandas and the parlor of Hazlett's cozy home are thronged with officers and ladies, chatting merrily together. The lights are still blazing in the barracks. The trumpeters in full force are grouped about the flagstaff sounding the last notes of tattoo. The Holdens have borne Miss Guthrie away with them, that the ladies might stow their evening gowns in the waiting Saragossas and then don their traveling garb while the quartermaster's big wagon trundles the luggage down to the railway station. Presently this lumbering vehicle can be seen slowly rolling away from the Holdens' gate, and everybody at Hazlett's waits impatiently for the return of the party. Mrs. Holden is deservedly a favorite in the garrison, and Nita Guthrie, as has been said, has won golden opinions. The evening air is growing chill, however, and of the dozen ladies present only the younger, the girls, remain longer upon the veranda.

About this pretty group, laughing and chatting, are four or five of the younger officers. Browster, "the swell of the subs," keeping close to Winifred Berrien, and claiming more and more of the glances of her big dark eyes. Down at the gate, the moonlight glinting on his polished salar, the officer of the day is exchanging a few low toned words with Major Berrien. Rolfe, who with silent and dogged resolution has taken his place at Miss Guthrie's side as she came down the stairs, and escorted her to the doctor's, has turned from there and gone slowly across the parade to his own quarters on the other side. Everybody seems to see and know what has happened, and many half whispered comments are being made, not all in sympathy with the willowed lover. Everybody respects Rolfe, yet among the younger officers are several who feel no warmth of friendship for him, and, as between man and man, garrison girls can only side with the youngsters. Their story of their slight differences is sometimes told again and again; the elders seldom, for theirs would hardly be believed.

Little by little the chat and laughter subside.

"Oh, why doesn't she come back?" pouts Miss Berrien. "The ambulances will be here in less than half an hour, and we won't see anything of her." A chorus of girlish voices echoes Winifred's views. Mrs. Berrien and Mrs. Parker at this moment come forth from the house and look expectantly up the road.

"How long they are!" says Winnie again. "What can keep them, mamma?"

"Packing, I doubt not, my child."

"But the wagon's gone, trunks and all. It can't be that."

"Still, I would not fret about it, Winnie. Has she not promised to come next spring and pay us a long visit?"

"Yes, but who knows where we may all be next spring, or what may happen meantime? Every paper we get is full of stories of the ghost dances among the Sioux, and if there should be another Indian war!"

"Nonsense, Winifred! Don't think of such a thing. After all this regiment has had to suffer in Indian battle, you don't suppose we, of all others, would be sent from here to a winter campaign in the northern department? We've seen the last of such troubles. God be thanked!"

Major Berrien, his interview with the officer of the day ended, has just started to rejoin the group on the veranda when he hears his wife's pious words. He whirls around sharply.

"Oh, captain, there's one thing I forgot to tell you." And the saber of the officer of the day clanks against his leg as Captain Porter faces about. The younger officers go on with their blithe chat; but Mrs. Berrien has known her lord twenty long years, and no sooner has the officer of the day departed than she hastens to join him.

"Dick," she falters, "surely you do not believe that there is any chance of the Twelfth going, even if there should be trouble? Dick, tell me."

"Berengaria, beloved inquisitor," he begins, "I didn't even know there was a row anywhere."

But she rebukes him by a single glance. "Tell me, Dick," she persists, and clings to his arm. "You don't think, after all we've been through, that, now that we are so happily settled here, there